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ENTRY OF CHARLES V INTO ANTWERP—THE NUDE FIGURES ARE NOT HISTORIC BUT DUE TO THE PAINTER'S FANCY

By HANS MAKART, AUSTRIAN PAINTER 1840-84

Commercial Future of Art

By A. P. JOHNSON

SHALL I buy? Shall I sell? Shall I hold? American men and women who own stocks, bonds, property and pictures are asking each other what to do. The effect of the European war on the business destiny and commercial future of one hundred million people is the all-absorbing topic among that portion of the one hundred million who assume the responsibility for the whole. "War is a bountiful jade," but it is, perhaps, more bountiful in its results. It is bountiful in misery, suffering, sorrow and hardship. It is bountiful in opportunity. In its wake of carnage and destruction follows new thought, new ideas, new motives. War destroys and builds. It bids for the new and places a premium on the old. It affects warring and neutral peoples alike. Hence its results until made manifest must remain a matter of visionary speculation. History has shown us that war does not teach the same lesson twice. Results and consequences differ. Only in suffering and want does it repeat itself.

When the editor asked me to write concerning the effect of the war on art as viewed from an American standpoint he gave problem beyond my ability to solve. Volumes have been written on the subject in its relation to other wars. Equally voluminous will be the comment on the effect of this greatest struggle of ages on the art of the world. It will be written after the war is over and has taught new lessons, when it has given rise to new schools, new ideas, new castes and new thought. No one can foretell what that art will be. No one can conjecture with even a shadow of authority what the trend will be in the minds that produce art for art's sake or its appreciation from a human standpoint.

Hence, my mission must of necessity be confined to the effect of the war on art from an economic standpoint and as applied principally to the prevailing market. In other words, to look the issue squarely in the face, will pictures cost more or less? Will statuary, bronzes, marbles, pottery, linens,

embroideries, bric-a-brac and things beautiful go up or down in price? Will necessity force a reduction in price at the source or will the demand inflate their value? Shall I buy now, or wait?

It was with an open mind that I asked this question of dealers, collectors and connoisseurs in Chicago. With an equal freedom of conviction I journeyed to New York, where I continued my quest for information—honest, unbiased, truthful information. Some dealers met me with the commercial assurance that “now is the time”—the kind of optimism that comes so naturally to those of born commercial instincts. Their view reminded me so much of elastic opinions of my tailor whose tastes and my own are so similar when he thinks I am pleased with a particular suit of clothes. Collectors, whether sincere or merely buyers, bemoaned the loss of the priceless works of art which for centuries have delighted the civilized world in the museums of Belgium and France. They gave no commercial thought to the future, largely, perhaps, because the element of cost had not figured in their operations in the past. Students and scholars speculated on new schools and their effect on the old. Connoisseurs did not know there was a war.

I am becoming more and more convinced that in the great school of art as we understand it there is no great average. To the same extent that a picture is very good or very bad is manifested the human appreciation of art itself. And it is right that it should be so. A great artist cannot give the world more than his art. He has nothing else to give. He has no means of placing a commercial value on his art except as dictated by the demand. Hence, he is a poor authority and an equally poor judge as to the economic value of art from the standpoint of market conditions. I met and talked with many we call successful artists. By that I mean artists who have succeeded in doing a little more than keeping body and soul together without selling their pictures for advertisements or magazine covers. Not

one of them had a definite idea as to whether or not their pictures would cost more or less in the future. They all hoped, of course, that prices would rise and more pictures be sold and that the American artist would come into his own.

It was on the first Saturday in October that I walked into the galleries of one of New York's foremost art establishments. The proprietor, himself a great connoisseur and collector, has made some of the biggest purchases in oils recorded in transferring of real oil paintings from European galleries to America.

“Are you selling any pictures?” I asked of him.

“Yes,” he replied, in a droll sort of way. “We sold one two weeks ago for twenty-five hundred dollars. When I say ‘sold’ I mean we delivered it two weeks ago. We sold it six months ago and had to compromise on half of the original price because the artist needed the money.”

“Does that seem to be the situation elsewhere?” I ventured.

“In so far as I know. A number of New York women have been trying to help out some of the French artists who are now at the front by disposing of their pictures at auction. We held a number of them here. They have all been returned.”

Of course, I need not say that my good friend knows more about pictures than he knows about selling or he would not have taken quite so pessimistic a view of things but he reflected conditions as I found them in the principal art stores of New York, Boston, Chicago and elsewhere. Pictures everywhere but not a soul in sight who seemed to have either the courage or inclination to buy. The dealers had not even taken the trouble to re-mark their catalogues on works upon which the prices had been reduced. Watchful waiting seemed to be their only hope, but

“None was there who chose to share
A hazard or a guess.”

It looked to me as if there would be no article on the effect of the war on the price

of pictures. As a matter of fact, it looked as if the only pictures we might hope to view in the future would be found in galleries where once upon a time the art loving public left fortunes and took the pictures. And it certainly could not be a part of the mission of this journal to discourage the buying of art. Far better to say nothing about it.

But there is one place in New York where pictures, as a rule, are not sold. That is, they are not displayed for their commercial value, but for the beauty that is born of pure art, for its influence upon mankind, for the making of the world better, more beautiful; a place that gives inspiration, where war and peace is depicted by the greatest minds that history has produced and where we can find object lessons in how to live, how to govern ourselves and others and how to die. That place is the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Who can resist the temptation, the desire, the magnetism that instinctively draws one from the turmoil of Broadway into this lofty treasury of all that is wonderful to man, whether wrought by his own hands or the hand of God. Cost and price are forgotten. War is forgotten. We are reminded only that we are a wonderful part of a wonderful world. We find ourselves speculating. Wither are we drifting? Are we going backwards or forwards? Are we any better, are we any more than the warring Egyptians who four thousand years ago produced colors the secrets of which have never become a part of our understanding? Are we greater than the sculptors of Venus, the builders of Rome or the founders of the Gothic arts? Surely, no one would desecrate those surroundings in sordid speculation as to how much this or that would cost after the Kings of Europe had finally decided who was to blame for the shooting of the Austrian archduke Ferdinand. And still, we must know. Someone has to come out of the trance long enough to make a guess.

The more I thought of my subject the

more I realized that in times like these it behooves those who believe in the civilizing influence of art to stand by their belief. Would all these things endure? Their very presence in our time proves that they have endured for more than four thousand years. They have endured and given birth to all that we call beautiful. From Mona Lisa to the lithograph print that brightens the hovel they have endured to bring hope, happiness and contentment to the world. From St. Gaudens to the maker of the penny doll they have given us all that we call beautiful in life. I was tempted for a moment to go back to my Fifth avenue picture dealer with the glad tidings that while there is life there is hope. It seemed to me there was nothing but life to those relics of the past. They spoke a beautiful language—the language of the dead to the living.

How could I bring this to apply to the present? Was it safe to permit an ethical inspiration to run away with business judgment? I had history and the survival of the fittest on my side, as against the fact that my Fifth avenue friend was finding difficulty in disposing of his stock. I had the endurance of ages with me and present business conditions against me. It is not proper, I know, in a journal of this kind to refer to that unenviable position in which we often find ourselves, namely, between the frying pan and the fire, but there is where I was, nevertheless.

The Metropolitan Museum of New York provides intelligent attendants in the various departments of the building. Some call them policemen, others call them professors, but everyone respects them for the authority they have. It was one of these men who unconsciously led me to a broad ray of light by introducing me to the *charge de affairs* of one of the great private collections which is now being exhibited at the museum. As this gentleman is in the employ of the estate by whose courtesy the collection may be viewed by the public, it would not be fair to use his name, especially as he has requested me not to do so. We

became great friends. At last I found some one who had nothing to sell. A man who buys from others for others. A man of profound knowledge of art from its historic, intrinsic and commercial value. A thorough American who would prefer to buy a picture from an American artist because of his patriotism, provided the work itself measured up to the desired standard.

During our conversation, which continued throughout the afternoon, at the dinner table at a downtown hotel and far into the night, I unburdened myself. In return I learned many things I would like to share with the readers of the *Fine Arts Journal*, many things which I cannot even write about, and things which I aim to follow with a view to giving its readers at some future time. But in order to pass the responsibility over to my friend who is far better qualified to assume it than am I, and whose authority I know you will respect (or would respect if you knew who he is), I shall quote his resume on the effect of the European war on the price of art, more especially as applied to paintings and etchings and the objects of art within the means of the buying public.

"I left Paris the latter part of July. It was the first time in my life I had ever visited Europe on a vacation. I wanted a rest and got it. When I go to Europe I go there to work. For years I had hoped to spend a summer season free of care. I wanted to be with the artists, dealers and collectors as a friend and acquaintance. I visited Vienna, Berlin, Antwerp and London. I spent my time in galleries, studios and salons for the purpose of getting some other view but my own or that of those I am paid to serve. I was impressed by the high standard of modern art. By modern art I do not mean the travesties and burlesques on art which of late have been confused with real inspiration and sincere merit. I mean good pictures by living artists, young and old, whose studies have hung and are to be found in the art centers of the world.

"It is the work of these artists that constitutes what we call modern art in painting. Their pictures form the so-called visible supply. You will find these pictures in every part of the civilized world. You will find them in homes, schools, business institutions, hotels, clubs and wherever pictures are an influence of refinement and culture. You will find prints, lithographs and reproductions of the same pictures in shops and in the homes of the poor. They please the eye—our eye as we have been taught to appreciate the beautiful in art.

"Bear in mind this salient fact. It has taken as much individual thought, study and inspiration to produce these works as was ever required to produce a masterpiece. The masterpieces in art are akin to the masterpieces in literature, music and scientific achievement. The masterpiece is not a part of the visible supply. It is not even related to the popular demand for art in that it has any relative value as to the cost of pictures that are in demand by the people who buy them for the comfort they bring. The masterpieces form, or help to form, inspiration. They give incentive and ambition to the painters of our day. They are the examples, the teachers. Whoever heard of a teacher's compensation as being the standard for the pupil? What an impoverished world this would be if that were true?

"Hence, to judge the future price of pictures by European artists we must reckon with the visible supply and prevailing demand. You say there is no demand. In the same breath you ask if the American artist will not come into his own as one of the results of this war. Let me answer both of these questions in one thought. Until the people of a nation learn to appreciate and understand art in its relation to nature, to history, to civilization, to prevailing and future conditions, the artist as an individual has no voice in the destiny of his art except in strictly local competition. By that I mean he is not rated in comparison with the artist of a land or country which

produces art, understands it and has studied it for centuries. It took the Greeks a thousand years to establish their school of art. It took the Romans even longer to understand art and apply it to their everyday lives.

"It has taken Europe two thousand years to measure up to the standards established by the ancients, during which time we have established nothing new that has not been aided or assisted by the old. While we are admittedly, as a nation and a people, direct offsprings of European civilization, we have established and pride ourselves on a new identity. We pride ourselves on leadership. We are producers. We are aggressive. Hence, we are at a loss to understand why we cannot establish a standard of our own in the fine arts with a resultant patronage of 'made in America' art.

"Now let me come to the point. If it were within our means to establish an American brand of paintings there would be no such paralysis as now exists in the fine arts market. The American people, by that I mean the so-called art-loving public, would be quick to realize the opportunity that knocks at their doors. They would buy all the good paintings by European artists that are now on sale in the commercial galleries at prices that by the very nature of things can never again be had.

"Think of what this war means to modern European art and to the European artist. The countries of Europe are impoverished by the ravages of war. Their peoples are selling, not buying. Their artists are fighting, not painting. Ambition is stifled, incentive is lost. The war has destroyed much of Europe's basic strength as a source of art and finer culture. The egomania of kings and subservient patriotism of a bonded people have and will change the order of things. There will be no more of the kind of pictures I saw in the galleries last summer. The pictures to come will be new, perhaps better in some instances, but in the great average below the standard which we have learned to understand. The artists

that survive will be seeking and groping. It does not seem reasonable that an artist with fine sensibilities can move from a bloody battlefield to the peace and quiet of his studio and be a better artist or a better human being. If he gets back at all his spirit will be broken or his ideas will be changed. He is not the same man. His school is gone. His physical and mental strength also. He cannot believe in the philosophic Christianity that furnished his inspiration in the past. He cannot understand peace and love for his fellow men. If he is a true artist he will regret that the war did not finish him with the rest. If he is a true artist he cannot understand why men should kill one another. He was not born of destruction. He was born of life—the life he reproduced on his canvas. He saw nothing but mystic beauty in death. Even the beauty of death is taken away from him. He has nothing—absolutely nothing.

"The artist that remains at home and survives, what of him? Can or will he go on and perpetuate the art we have learned to love? Can he continue to paint Arcadian peace and Utopian love from a sincere belief in the existence of such ideals? Can he put the touch of Christianity into his work and make himself and others believe in its philosophy? Can he paint the Madonna with the holy inspiration that the Christ child has furnished two thousand years of civilization? Holy? What does it mean? he will ask. Peace? He can find no definition of the word. Love? A man cannot love and kill, he says.

"Tell your readers, my good friend, to buy their pictures now. Tell them to buy pictures by both European and American artists. Tell them to buy them at any cost. American art, whatever it will be, whatever will be its inspiration, it will not contain the Christ-child as the basis of holy refinement. The gentle Apostle of Peace, whom you and I have learned to love as a man among men, as a divine offspring, as the founder of Christianity, will not figure in



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the art of the future. He will give place to a natural Christianity. He will give place to nature, the shaded woodland, the bubbling brook, the love of animals for one another, for animals kill only to subsist. He will give place to imagination, perhaps to the impressionist. Until we get something besides mythical belief we must believe in art for art's sake. The new will be allegorical, imaginative, untried. The old will be priceless. It will remind us of the past as the relics in the Metropolitan remind us of the thousand years dead.

"It is my opinion that this evolution will not be long in asserting itself. It will come soon, perhaps within a few years. You and I will live to see it. Pictures will cost more because there will be less of the kind we will want to have in our homes for our children to study and understand. Pictures will cost more because more than half of the younger artists in Europe are being killed or broken. Pictures will cost more because

American artists will introduce a new school based on human Christianity and brotherly love. Pictures painted yesterday will cost more because yesterday has gone forever and we are entering upon a new era. We are entering the unknown in art and in human belief. Tell your readers to buy their pictures now and hold and guard closely those they now possess."

Is there anything more to say? Nothing that I can add except that unless history repudiates itself what my friend said will come true. It is my belief that when it does there will be many who will want the pictures they had a chance to buy for a song that are now decorating the sales rooms in Chicago and New York. They will be the Rembrandts of the future. And to you who cannot see anything in a picture but the price: if you will get some good friend who knows a good picture when he sees one you cannot make a business mistake if you buy that picture today.